PITTA

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3/XII 2004

PROGRAMME - November and December

FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 19-xii-2004: Rouriyal Tank, Rangareddi District: Route Charminar – Barkas – Pahadi Shareef. After 12 – 13 km., take the first left turn after Pahadi Shareef and drive on for 5 km. to the tank, which is on the right hand side of the road. Members are requested to reach the destination by 7.15 – 7.30 a.m. There should be lots of migrants around at this time of the year, with the waterfowl already in in impressive numbers. Added attractions here are the Crested Honey Buzzards that are always to be seen in the area, and used to nest in a large tree near the tank. There are sure to be lots of ducks, especially Pintails and Widgeons around, maybe even a few Barheaded Geese. This will be a half-day trip. Carry water and snacks. For further details contact Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)

Members willing to take/offer other members lift in their vehicles please contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla.

INDOOR MEETING: 20-xii-2004, 6pm: Vidyaranya High School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad.

NOTES & NEWS

BUTTERFLIES, THE FLYING JEWELS

(A report on the indoor meeting held on 16th August 2004)

by

S. Ashok Kumar

(with inputs from Kiran Katikaneni)

"Is the Elephant dung good to eat?" thus the talk and demonstration of 'Moths and Butterflies' by Dr. S. Tej Kumar started. This drew varied and funny answers from the audience and finally Dr. Kumar himself went on to say that, 'Well, it must be so. Because 26 species of Insects cannot be wrong in their preference for elephant dung for food, shelter etc.

Dr. Kumar is an Entomologist and the founder-secretary of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh. He introduced the audience to the wonderful world of Insects by talking about their distribution worldwide and in India.

The meeting was well attended and the questions posed showed the keenness of the participants in knowing more about butterflies and moths.

At the outset Dr. Tej Kumar, Entomologist pointed out that 75% of the life-forms on earth are insects and tat there are 20,000 species of butterflies in the world out of which 1500 are found in India. Of these 306 species are found in South India including about 125 species found in Hyderabad region. Outlining the morphology of butterflies and moths belonging to the same group called Lepidoptera meaning scaled wings, he stated that moths are nocturnal while the butterflies are diurnal, while few others are crepuscular. Generally the lifespan of these insects is about ten days but the butterflies belonging to Papilionidae family like the Birdwing are known to live forever six months and certain butterfly species are noted to live upto one year. Moths lay eggs as an eggmass on the underside of leaves while the butterflies lay eggs on the upper side, either spindle shaped or spherical, singly. Caterpillars are the larvae of these insects. He mentioned that in lifecycle of insects there is partial and complete metamorphosis. Abundance, prolific output, short lifespan, small size and mimicry are the survival and defense strategies adopted by them. Compared to butterflies which are effective pollinators, moths are more harmful as they attack and destroy food crops, fruit gardens etc. Red hairy caterpillar, skippers, pyralids and stem borers are a menace to the crops. The citrus butterfly attacks the citrus plants. Only a few moth species are beneficial to us.

The Sphinx or death-head moth is the most attractive of all the moths. Butterfly chrysalids are shiny, attractive, naked and devoid of cocoon whereas caterpillars of moths weave a cocoon for their pupation mostly pupating in soil or leaf litter or in stems. Tussar moth produces tussar silk and the mulberry moth produces the mulberry silk. Dr. Tej Kumar mentioned that one mulberry silk pupa can produce about a kilometre of length of silk.

Referring to migratory butterflies he pointed out that the Painted Lady and dark clouded yellow butterfly immigrants are very rare to Hyderabad region, common being Emigrant species. Out of

125 species of butterflies found in Hyderabad region more than 50% are of rare occurrence.

Dwelling on butterfly diversity in the Hyderabad area, he detailed the species of butterflies representing nine families namely Acraeidae (Coasters), Danaidae (Crows & Tigers), Hesperidae (Skippers & Darts), Lycaenidae (Blues, Coppers & Metal marks), Nemeobidae (Judies & Punches), Nymphalidae (Admirals, Emperors, Rajas & Venessas), Papilionidae (Swallowtails, Birwings & Apollos), Pierridae (Sulphurs, Whites, Orange and Crimson tips & Jezebels) and Satyridae (Browns, Satyrs & Wood nymphs). Few families are represented by one species only.

Emphasizing that habitat destruction, scarcity of water sources, lack of concern for these creatures have affected them. He finally stated that in the absence of detailed surveys on their occurrence and populations, there is awful lack of diversity inventories in Andhra Pradesh. Urgent steps are necessary for taking conservation measures and creating awareness about their ecological and economic significance which form part of food chain of birds. They are indeed a part of our faunal diversity and national heritage.

Urban Birding

by

The City Bird-Brain

Were I to be asked to select a bird that epitomises this part of the world, I would, unhesitatingly, pick the Common Myna. There is something dashing about this bold brigand. He swaggers about as though any place he may see fit to grace with his presence, for the duration of his stay there, belongs to him. Nor is his appearance hard on the eyes – distinctly pleasing, in fact. Colourful without being too flamboyant; tasteful without being too garish. Moreover I have been informed, though I cannot vouch for it, that he is an industrious worker and a friend of the farmer as well. All these are noble properties and deserve a closer look at the owner of said properties. So this month, we focus on the Common Myna – a cosmopolitan bird but certainly at home both in the city and out of it. You will find these birds on the rooftops of houses in Charminar (one of the busiest places I know of), and at the other end, do not be surprised to encounter this species in the middle of Anantagiri Hills reserved forest area.

We find this chap also in places as diversified as the British Isles and I remember seeing a few in Nairobi (Kenya) as well. I am also told that they are residing quite happily in some other areas of Europe as well, and certainly they are present in Southern Africa also. These are imported specimens; (*Firangeez* as we call their equivalents here). The *Angrez* were not immune to the charms of this bird and they took a few specimens back home with them. These were the raw stock from which came the subsequent suburban, and later the feral population of these birds, in climes hitherto unknown to the species, but which, with their typical audacity, they immediately set about adapting to and thriving in. They possess the knack of adapting to the environment without demanding that the environment adapt to them; though they ensure the latter in course of time.

I have a few residing in the mango tree across the street from the flat. They are usually the first to wake up in the morning. And once they are up, everyone else has to follow – they see to that. Never was a more talkative bird (and that includes the Babblers!) – the beak never closes from morning to night. And they generally seem to be having an interesting and meaningful conversation. I defy anyone to disprove the fact that their conversation is meaningful, interesting and entertaining. All that is lacking is the words that we can understand – and if we cannot understand their language – that is no fault of the Myna. Having said that, we are told that they are quite capable of mimicking the human language too. My old man tells of a pet Myna they had in the days of long ago, (and I mean long ago – when the old man was considerably younger than I am now!), that was capable of saying quite intelligent sentences. I regret that I seem to have forgotten the sentences the bird specialised in – but they were intelligent sentences; of that I am quite certain.

A good many Mynas are seen in the cages of the bird market in the Mehboob Chowk area in Hyderabad. Most of them have a few feathers missing, the result of getting caught in bird-lime traps. There seems to be a ready market for these birds – which is not to be wondered at, given their attractions and their ability to mimic the human voice. At the same time be it said that I personally consider it a shame that so attractive a bird should be shut up in a cage and made to repeat words that have little or no meaning. Having said that, I remember that our pet parrot learnt to accurately mimic the Mynas in the tree opposite the balcony. These Mynas used to stand on the branch and shout (rude?!) words at the parrot, and that bird picked up the words and many interesting duets were played between the protagonists from time to time. I think I started to develop my sick headaches from that point onwards.

I recollect a time when I was standing waiting for a train at the Srikakulam Road railway station. The platform was shaded by two giant tamarind trees which were quite obviously a roost for the entire Myna population of the area (if not the entire district). Never have I seen so many Mynas together gathered – and all talking at the tops of their not inconsiderable voices. Strangely though, this chatter does not give one the headache that human chatter on a far lesser scale is capable of. But setting aside this headache matter – I exaggerate not when I say that there were at least a thousand Mynas gathered on those two trees. They kept up a continuous activity for over an hour. Small parties would sally forth periodically and return and, on one occasion, when a flock of crows appeared, a flock of about 50 strong took off and harried those unfortunates for a good 2 minutes until the crows had crossed some invisible boundary, at a good distance from their roost. For those who are interested, my train was three hours late that day!

For their size, these birds are extraordinarily bold. I have seen a pair of Common Mynas seeing off a flock of crows, which seemed to have evil designs on the nest that the birds had constructed in a hibiscus hedge. A Shikra was also the target of incessant chivvying by the birds when it blundered past the